Mapping services theory to PhD supervision: lessons to be learned for doctoral students' visibility

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Abstract

This paper considers the relevance of services theory to the process of PhD supervision. Many PhD students in business disciplines study in dyads rather than groups and study part time rather than full time. This can make it difficult for them (and their research) to become visibly noticed in faculties and departments. As the process of education is a service rather than a product, it is relevant to use services theories to examine the doctoral supervision process to identify ways in which visibility and, thereby, satisfaction may be improved.

Several services marketing theories are mapped to the process of doctoral supervision. These are the features of services, the service quality gaps model, services theatre and the importance of the service encounter. All the theories are found to be clearly relevant to the doctoral supervision process.

Having established that services theory can be used to describe, analyse and improve the doctoral supervision process, the issue of visibility is examined in a pilot study with a small number of PhD students to determine how they feel about the issue and what can be done to improve their experience. This study does not use the traditional questionnaire approach favoured by national quality and satisfaction surveys, but uses open-ended questions to gather qualitative data.

The pilot study shows that visibility is not an issue for all students and that while there are some easy options for improving visibility, these do not suit all students. Further work is needed in this area to explore how services theory can help to improve doctoral students' visibility and overall experience.

Introduction

There has been much debate in recent years about higher education (HE) being a service and about students becoming customers. There is some debate as to whether students should be treated as customers (Finney and Finney, 2010) and some believe that students should be challenged rather than cosseted and should never be treated as customers (Hayes, 2011). Since all universities essentially operate in a service environment, it is reasonable to include a measure of students' satisfaction as *part* of the measure of their success as a service.

Universities' performance is measured in many and various ways, not least being the league tables published in the UK press, but also including regular questionnaires administered by third parties in the quest for measures of 'satisfaction' (rather than efficacy of teaching and learning, which may be better measured by the forthcoming TEF). The very fact that we measure satisfaction through the National Student Survey, Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey, Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and so on, points to a recognition of HE as a complex service. In common with all complex services, there are challenges and difficulties

and, while these are recognised, the solutions proposed could make more use of services theory.
One of the complications to the HE service environment is that students may study in a variety of ways. This accommodates their needs, but creates different types of experiences. PhD students have the option to study part time and many do. Indeed, Andrew (2012) states that half 'downunder's' PhD students are part time and 40% are academics seeking to improve their career prospects, while up to 63% of PhD students in the UK are part timers (Deem and Brehony, 2000). Some feel that part-time PhD students are disadvantaged through not being a visible part of the university's research community, having limited access to resources and a general lack of human contact (Chiang, 2003; Andrew, 2012) – they are effectively 'invisible'. Even full-time PhD students may struggle to feel part of the academic community. In fact, as many full-time PhD students also teach and/or work in paid employment for at least part of the week, it may be rare to find a truly 'full-time' PhD student.

This pattern of study is not a new phenomenon, but it has become an increasingly common option for students and for undergraduates in particular, as fees have risen and students worry about debt and employability. Indeed, some authors believe that the traditional idea of a full-time student has had its day, as the majority of full-timers are working part time (Robotham, 2009).

This paper will consider the literature in the area of part-time study, its effect on students and implications for supervision. Ideas will be presented about how services marketing theory may be applied to understand the issues and some potential routes to improving students' visibility and, thereby, their experience, will be suggested. The results of a pilot survey of part-time PhD students will be shared and the relationships between issues raised and regulations and quality standards will be discussed. Finally, the conclusion notes that there are some relatively simple ways in which visibility may be improved and actions supervisors can take to help those who feel 'invisible', using the application of services theory.

Part-time experiences – issues from the literature

Concerns about part-time study are rooted in what the student is doing with the other part of his/her time, such as working, looking after family or coping with illness. Commonly, it is employment that occupies the other part of the part-time student's time, and this is certainly the case for PhD students (Andrew, 2012). Indeed, many study for their PhD alongside full-time employment. Despite the fact that many PhD students work while studying, there is little research on the consequences of this (Gardner and Gopaul, 2012). Research about part-time undergraduates and the effect on their studies and outcomes is more common, with positive outcomes including improved employability and negative outcomes including reduced study time, tiredness and lack of social life (Robotham, 2012; Watts, 2002; Keast, 1998). Curtis (2005) found that academics were unaware of the work commitments of full-time undergraduates.

But surely the situation is different for PhD students? The closer working relationship between supervisor and student lends itself to knowing more about the student's life outside of study. Supervisors know whether their students are working full or part time and have an idea of the stresses that will cause. So why is this an issue?

Part-time status has an effect on completion rates. HEFCE (2007) published data that shows that of those students registered for a full-time PhD in 1996–7, 76% completed within 10 years, while only 48% of part-time students completed in this time. As PhD regulations usually specify completion in much less time than this, these figures are rather alarming. The problem is that PhD study is intense, long-term and very individual – there is capacity for research to become a very lonely activity. Research with full-time PhD students in traditional supervisor–student dyads has shown that they can feel isolated, not part of a research community and unrecognised in their department, while PhD students working as part of a research group do not feel this way as they tend to be working on the same project as their supervisors, as demonstrated in Figure 1 (Chiang, 2003). Similarly, Deem and Brehony (2000) found that non-science students were more likely to work alone than science students.

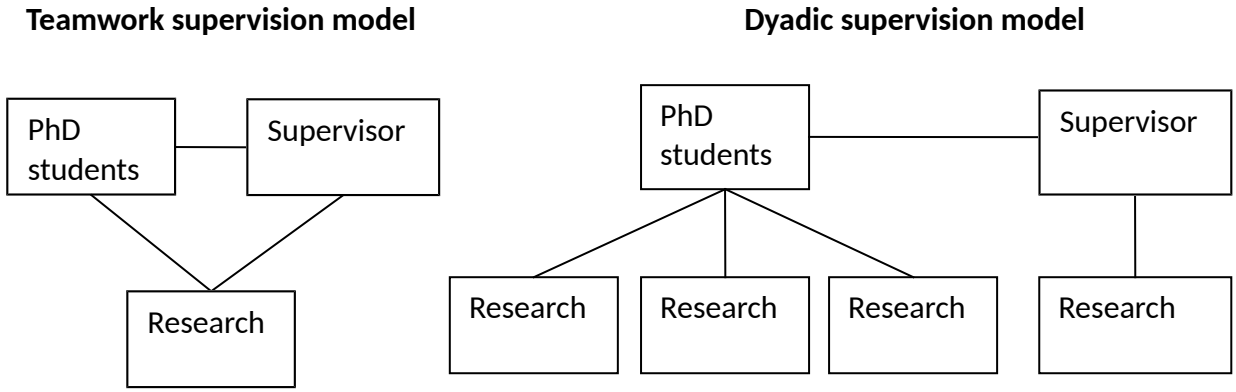

Figure 1 Comparison of teamwork and dyadic supervision models (based on Chiang, 2003)

Students working in a collaborative cohort module of supervision reported mixed reactions – some found the model useful in sharing ideas and increased collegiality while others found conflicting opinions unhelpful and still felt isolated (Govender and Dhunpath, 2011). Gardner and Gopaul (2012) reviewed the literature available about part-time PhD students in the USA and found that they were less satisfied with their doctoral experience (Neumann and Rodwell, 2009) and less scholarly engaged (see, for example, Biegel *et al*., 2006) than their full-time counterparts. Deem and Brehony (2000) found that 'international students and part-time students have the most difficulty in accessing peer cultures and academic cultures' (p.149).

The challenges for part-time PhD students according to this literature include problems such as lack of access to resources (Andrew, 2012), not being known in the department and one's work not being recognised (Chiang, 2003) and lack of access to peer culture (Deem and Brehony, 2000; Chiang, 2003). This may be encapsulated by describing them as 'invisible'.

Challenges for supervisors

The challenges for the student seem clear, but what are the challenges for the supervisor and for the process of supervision? Green and Bowden (2012) suggest that all PhD students need relational, intellectual, physical and emotional (RIPE) space to succeed. The RIPE model may be particularly applicable to part-time students who face the various challenges already mentioned. Supervisors must be aware of the doctoral student's life outside of the research project and make appropriate allowances. For this a relationship must develop in which each trusts the other so that the student is able to confide in the supervisor as necessary. In terms of the concepts of research supervision developed by Lee (2008) this would be similar to the 'relationship development' concept in which the supervisor uses emotional intelligence to

develop a (working) relationship with the student. Watts (2008) states that ‘strategies to support [doctoral students’] progress have to be proactive, well planned and sensitive to individual circumstances’ (p. 369) involving use of good communication, clear planning and empathy. This may be challenging for those supervisors who use a more functional approach (Lee, 2008) to supervision.

It seems sensible that the supervisor should check that the student is comfortable with his/her position in the research community and take actions to remedy any problems that arise. Regular communication using a range of channels – including face-to-face – is essential to fulfil the basic need for human contact (Andrew, 2012). With the technology available now, there is no reason why supervisors and students should not have regular face-to-face contact. The need to belong may be more difficult for supervisors to satisfy alone, but they could ensure their students are aware of events and conferences and of other researchers’ work as part of the process of supervision (Watts, 2010). The planning referred to by Watts (2008; 2010) is similar to the need uncovered by Andrew (2012) for planned, regular contact – knowing what to expect and when gives students (and supervisors) a sense of structure and allows realistic expectations to be formed.

Perhaps the most significant challenge for supervisors is to see themselves not as academic mentors, but as service providers. If PhD supervision is a service embedded in the various other complex services of HE provision, then the supervisor is the key to that provision for doctoral students and the PhD tutorial is a complex and in-depth service encounter. This leads us to consider how services theory maps onto PhD supervision.

Mapping services theory to PhD supervision

Education is a service, rather than a product, and has been subject to research by service marketers for some time, especially as students paying higher fees begin to see themselves more as ‘customers’ (Finney and Finney, 2010). Several key theories from the services literature will be considered here, mapped to PhD supervision, namely (a) the key features of services (b) the services quality gaps model (c) services theatre and (d) the service encounter.

Key features of services

Services marketing theory teaches that services are different from products in that they are intangible, subject to variability, cannot be stored for later consumption and are produced and consumed simultaneously (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2006). These four characteristics of services certainly seem true of education in general and of the process of supervision in particular. The supervision process needs all parties to engage for it to function properly (inseparability), may be different from tutorial to tutorial and from supervisor to supervisor (variability), cannot be saved for later (perishability) and has no tangible product (intangibility). There is much in the services marketing literature about how services can add value for customers through reducing the impact of these service characteristics. This is therefore a useful model to explore in terms of PhD supervision.

- The process of supervision can be made more **tangible** through records of meetings, emails, written feedback on draft chapters and annual progress reports.

- **Variability** can be reduced (although not eliminated) through using the structures put in place by universities to monitor the stages of the process – forms and processes laid out in regulations help students to set realistic expectations and should lead to a less variable

experience from one student to the next. As with all service environments, variability is affected by human action – no matter which structures and processes are in place, they must be operated by supervisors who often act alone, sometimes in teams, and rarely with knowledge of how other supervisors are using the same structures and processes. Central quality control measures are designed to monitor this and should further reduce the problems of variability.

- **Inseparability** and **perishability** are more difficult to deal with but may be alleviated through contact via several means and through the very fact that the students' research continues between tutorials.

Accepting that the PhD supervision process is clearly subject to the features of services, it follows that the service provision is unlikely to be perfectly matched to students' needs or their expectations, particularly given the dyadic nature of supervision in business subjects and the fact that structures and processes tend to be rigid rather than flexible. The quality gaps model helps to explore areas in the supervision process that may be problematic.

Service quality gaps model

The model (Figure 2) shows the various gaps in service, e.g. between the customer's expectations and perceptions or between what the service provider promises to supply and what is actually delivered. Dann (2008) demonstrates how the model may be used to assess potential problem areas in the research supervision process.

The gap between management's perceptions of students' expectations and what is actually expected (Gap 1) may rarely be measured at the start of the supervision process, although it is often measured during and at the end of the process. Learning at the end of the process that expectations were different from those that had been anticipated by management is clearly too late, yet many of the surveys of satisfaction that reveal problems with this gap are only conducted at the end of each year.

Using incorrect management perceptions of what PhD students expect from supervision to design the service and its quality indicators and measures is a recipe for failure (Gap 2). Some quality indicators may be based on national standards, such as those indicated by the QAA Code of Practice (2004), which covers the institution's responsibility to 'provide research students with sufficient information to enable them to begin their studies with an understanding of the academic and social environment in which they will be working' (p.12). This clearly implies that PhD students should be told what to expect from the outset and that the academic and social environment is the key to improving visibility of part-time students.

Problems with Gap 3 arise when supervisors do not deliver what is set out in the institution's standards and/or deliver varying versions of how those standards may be interpreted. Supervisors are nor automata (thank goodness!) but are individuals working on a range of projects with a range of PhD students. Variability in service is a considerable issue here, but may not be a problem if the service is tailored to meet individual students' needs. Indeed, in the dyadic model of supervision, it is likely that supervision needs to be different from one dyad to another, tailoring the teaching and learning experience to suit the student's needs and the subject matter. The manner in which supervision is conducted may vary, but institutional record keeping and adherence to milestones are designed to ensure that no matter how supervision and research is conducted (i.e. how the teaching and learning process works) the student in each dyad will have similar elements in their journey to completion. For example,

there may be a requirement to complete a record form for every supervision meeting, but each supervisor may record in different ways, even though they use the same form.

Given the variable nature of dyadic supervision and of the projects undertaken at PhD level, there are challenges in presenting an accurate picture of what is offered by departments or faculties in external and internal communications (Gap 4).

Finally, a doctoral student will have expectations of what supervision will entail, based on previous experience of education, what he/she has heard from others and on his/her own personal needs. These expectations may differ from student to student and may be entirely different from what the supervisor will deliver (Gap 5). This gap could be closed either through improved delivery to meet expectations or through helping the student to adjust his/her expectations, thereby improving the quality of the supervision process.

What may be learned from the application of services theory is that it is important to know what doctoral students expect, what they experience and whether they feel they have received good quality and satisfaction. Then, reflecting on that, it is possible to make improvements. This customer-focused approach is what Watts (2008), writing from an education perspective rather than a services perspective, calls ‘student-centred practice’.

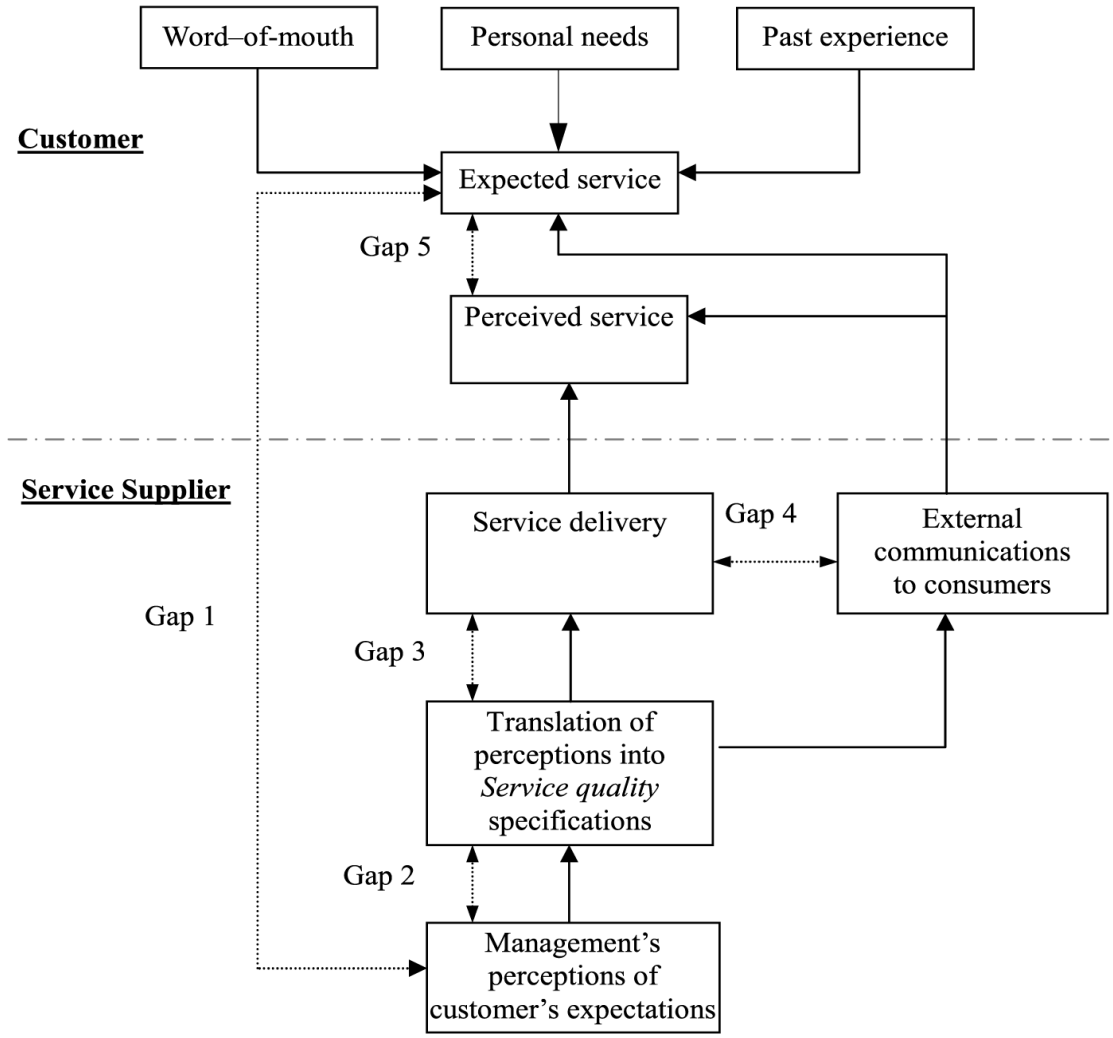

Figure 2 The gaps model of service quality (based on Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2006)

Identifying the gaps

Service organisations measure customers' satisfaction for a number of reasons, including attempts to understand customers' needs and wants, for planning and making improvements to service and measuring the perceived impact of those improvements, and for identifying gaps between expectations and perceptions so that resources may be targeted appropriately (Fisk *et al*., 2008). This last point is particularly important in public services settings in which budgets are tight and those responsible are accountable to the public (Wisniewski, 2001). In HE student satisfaction is measured for the same uses internally, but also presented externally in league tables, which affect public perception and the brand, and are designed in part to help students make better informed decisions about where they want to study (Harvey *et al*., 1997).

There are several well-known tools for measuring customer satisfaction, such as SERVQUAL, which was developed by Parasuraman *et al*. (1988). The SERVQUAL survey asks respondents for an indication of their expectations as well as their perceptions of service, and establishes the gap between the two. Other researchers, such as Cronin and Taylor (1992), hold that only the perception of quality is important. SERVQUAL has been used in universities to assess satisfaction not only with teaching and learning, but with support services such as information technology (Smith *et al*., 2007). Authors have proposed several variations, including SERVPERF, optionally asking respondents to weight the importance of their answers, and HEdPERF – devised specifically for use in HE by Firdaus (2006). For a useful comparison of these tools see Brochado (2009).

The nationally used surveys of satisfaction, including the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, use the perception of quality approach favoured by Cronin and Taylor (1992), assuming that this is the only important measure and that students' original expectations are not important. It is true that the measure of perception of quality may be used to inform future standards and operations, but there may be little point to amending standards and operations to suit perceptions if the original expectations were unreasonable or unachievable. It is therefore important to discover PhD students' expectations prior to starting study and regularly from then onwards in order to manage those expectations and close gaps were possible. This is where the supervisory relationship is absolutely crucial, as it is discussions within this relationship that will reveal problems to be solved. In this way, supervisors have a responsibility to be a service manager in addition to being an academic mentor.

Services theatre

In the services theatre model (see Fisk, Grove and John, 2008), the supervisor is the actor on stage, with a script to follow (which may vary with each performance), props to use (which may be the institution's procedures and structures) and a performance to give. The doctoral student is the audience, but must participate in the encounter for the learning to take place. In this way the learning is co-produced and the service is co-created (Williams and Anderson, 2005). What the student does not always see are the many and varied support services and functions back stage, such as the workings of the research ethics committee or faculty research committee or research administration office. These parts of the service are essential for the service to run smoothly and when there is a breakdown between back stage and on-stage performance, there is opportunity for gaps in service quality to arise.

Service encounters – the supervision tutorial

The importance of the supervisor as the representative of the overall service and as the person who actually delivers (or co-creates) the service has already been mentioned. The service encounter, that is a touch point during which the student as customer works together with the supervisor to produce learning as a service, is not only a key part of the learning process in PhD study, but is key to the PhD student's perceptions of the PhD process and the faculty and university in more general terms. It's also important to note that students' motives and personal approach to study may also affect their perception of the quality of the service encounter. Strombeck and Wakefield (2008) demonstrated this with respect to passengers on aeroplanes, but the principle is the same – the situation can impact on how customers perceive the service they receive.

Summary of services theory issues

In this short paper it is not possible to go into great depth about services theory and there are others that could have been mentioned here, but it is clear from this brief consideration that several theories and models are pertinent to the doctoral supervision process and that the theory may be used to help improve that process and, thereby, the student experience. As the starting place of this paper was to consider the experience of PhD students as they are often not 'visible' in the same way that undergraduates may be, it was relevant to investigate the concept of visibility with PhD students themselves. The research questions are, therefore:

RQ1 How 'visible' do part-time PhD students feel?
RQ2 Which of the service gaps are evident in the part-time PhD student experience?
RQ3 What can be done to make PhD students feel more visible?

What students say – pilot study

A key concern in the literature about part-time study, which is commonly the route for those studying for PhDs in business disciplines, is the lack of visibility in the department/ faculty. This issue may be mapped to Gaps 4 and 5, in which students may expect a PhD community based on external communications and may then find that they are largely on their own.

To investigate this issue as a starting place for using services theory to improve PhD students' experience, a small number of part-time PhD students were asked for their opinions about their visibility via a short questionnaire:

1. How 'visible' do you feel as a part-time PhD student?

2. Do you feel happy with how 'visible' you are in the research community?

3. What do you think contributes to making you feel 'invisible'?

4. Which of these initiatives do you feel would help to make you more 'visible'?

The research approach was interpretivist, with a social constructivist ontological position. 'Visibility' was not defined for the participants, allowing them to interpret this concept in their own way. While visibility may be defined simply as not being seen, this may be too simple a definition and a clearer, more nuanced understanding of what it is to be 'visible' as a part-time PhD student may result from this research.

Suggested initiative	Would make me more visible	Would make no difference	Don't know/ not sure
A PhD notice board showing profile photos of each PhD student with a short summary of his/her research, prominently displayed in the Business School	2		2
A research round-up newsletter (for all researchers – staff and students) so we are all aware of what everyone else is doing	2	2	
An online space such as a Facebook page for PhD students where you can discuss and share ideas without supervisors around	2	1	1
A regular social activity for PhD students	3	1	
Being included in the Business School Research Group meetings	2	1	1

5. Do you have any other suggestions as to how you could become more 'visible'?

The open-ended nature of the questions encouraged students to reply in more depth than is allowed by standard feedback questionnaires. Only question 4 required the participants to select an answer (the answers to this question are shown in Figure 3).

Two feel visible – both are in the early stages of their PhD. One is an associate lecturer and the other is engaged with teaching in the Law School, so this may explain their feeling of visibility. Two feel invisible – one recognises that this due to being a distance learner, but the other is a member of staff, which raises important questions about how visible the research element of his/her job appears to be. One respondent referred to her expectations of PhD study in her answer:

> *'As a part-time PhD student I do not feel visible at all. But this doesn't bother me since I know that doing a PhD is not like any other form of studies like my undergraduate degree for example. There are no classes to attend etc. So embarking on a PhD, especially long-distance too, I sort of expected (of course it's much more demanding than I thought) what it would be like.'*

There are mixed feelings about their visibility status. Only one student is definitely unhappy. The others are happy or ambivalent and would value more exposure. One values the quiet time and isolation.

> *'I think I would feel happier if I could attend all the research seminars offered by the Research Office, then I would get the opportunity to meet other students etc.'*

> *'I feel quite happy, nevertheless more exposure would be nice.'*

'No, I do not [feel happy]. *I do not get much time or support to target the 'right' research communities. This always seems to be relegated in comparison to other priorities in organisation. Or at least made to feel as if it is.'*

'I am probably glad in some respects that I am not over visible, due to the nature of the course. With this said, I sometimes find that the isolation, or quiet time is to some extent, a blessing, and is sometimes very much needed, in order to get the work actually completed.'

The contributing factors to invisibility are identified as distance, being away from the university, lack of time/support/interest, exclusion from 'the framework' (it is unclear what this means) and lack of correspondence.

Some suggestions about improving visibility were made to the participants. These were based largely on ideas from employee engagement theories in human resource management (Mullins, 2013).

- Two felt a **notice board** showing their profiles and summaries of their projects would help them become more visible, while two were not sure about this.
- Two said a **research newsletter** would help, while two said it would make no difference.
- Two said a **shared online space** would help, while one said it would make no difference and one was not sure.
- Three said a **regular social activity** would help, but one felt it would make no difference.
- Two felt that being included in the **Business Research Group meetings** would help, while one felt it would not and one was not sure.

When asked if they had any other suggestions about how to improve their visibility, there were very few suggestions – involvement in teaching (which is already an option), more support for research at a senior level and involvement in university events.

It is impossible to draw clear conclusions from such mixed results in a very small sample, but these responses do at least give an indication of the problems and potential solutions. Perhaps the only fair conclusion one can draw from these results is that all students are individuals with different needs, so one solution is not going to meet the needs of all students. This diversity in the PhD student population is not surprising, given the individual nature of PhD study in business disciplines and given the various modes of study available.

How can part-time students become more visible?

Many of the structures and mechanisms are already in place to increase doctoral students' visibility. University regulations and the QAA quality code of conduct encourage supervisors and universities to be alert to the academic and social environment in which their students operate. As large, complex service organisations, universities should take measures to ensure their students' expectations are satisfied, while students themselves have a responsibility to take opportunities to engage with the research community. Despite this, the problem of invisibility persists, as shown in the literature and in the small sample of participants involved in the present work. There are some simple measures that seem sensible and achievable, as follows.

- Supervisors may check whether their students feel part of the academic, research and social communities and, if a student is not satisfied with his/her experience, advise on how to improve it.
- Planned, regular contact between the student, supervisor and other points of contact using a range of communications tools may improve the feeling of belonging.
- Dialogue with other PhD students and researchers, no matter how this is facilitated, seems a valuable way to help students form a community.
- Institutional support, such as easily accessible information, research seminars, workshops and training sessions will encourage involvement with the academic community and with other PhD students.

These measures, well within the constraints of a supervision relationship, may lead to the closure (or at least narrowing) of the gaps identified earlier, thereby improving PhD students' experience.

Following the completion of the short questionnaire used in this study, several changes were made at the students' business school, in which all students work in the dyadic model of supervision. These included the use of a research students' noticeboard, inclusion of PhD students in research group meetings and more regular and deliberate communications with students about opportunities for training, conferences and relevant employment. Of the three changes, the communications initiative was the most time-consuming, while the noticeboard and inclusion in meetings were simple to arrange and afforded great visibility for the students.

Conclusion

Many doctoral students study part-time and this may disadvantage them through not being (or feeling) part of a research community. The challenges for students are more pronounced in traditional dyadic supervision relationships, which are more common in some research areas than others. The challenges are not insurmountable, however, and may be addressed – if not overcome – through careful supervision and provision of institutional measures such as shared spaces and clear lines of communication. The QAA Code of Practice and institutional regulations provide guidance that can be broadly interpreted as covering the emotional side of the supervision relationship as well as the practical and academic sides. The RIPE model, if followed, will help supervisors to ensure that all their students' needs are being met.

The application of services theory to the supervision process gives a useful insight into the nature of the process and the analysis of gaps in provision. This has clear links to student-centred practice and could usefully be developed further. It may be uncomfortable for some supervisors to see themselves as service providers rather than as academic mentors, but the nature of HE today means that this dual identity for supervisors is absolutely essential for doctoral students if they are to achieve their PhDs while also feeling that they have had a good experience while studying.

Responses from current PhD students have shown that each is unique and that institution-wide (or even school-wide) measures may not be the total solution. Each individual has his/her own needs and expectations and it is the supervisor who is the first point of contact in meeting those needs and managing those expectations.

As supervisors and students reflect on their own practice – on their own research and how they approach it – this is the opportunity to make sure that all researchers, whether full or part time and no matter their subject, feel part of a supportive research community, delivered as part of a coherent and well-managed complex service.

Finally, this paper provides the results of a very small study that is part of a larger project. The questionnaire will be repeated later in 2017 to assess the impact of the measures introduced as a result of the pilot study. The full research study will interview a larger sample of part-time and full-time students in the autumn semester of 2017. The interview will partly be based around the service gaps model with a view to service improvement and improvement of the student experience and will also consider theories of belonging and identity (Reay et al., 2009; Lawson, 2014), as previous research has shown these to be important factors to the student experience (at undergraduate level) and have clear links to the notion of visibility. It is hoped that this will lead to the development of theory around the management of doctoral level student experience to take into account potential links between the issues of belonging, identity and service provision.

5538 words

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